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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the relationship between children's communication competence and perceptions of communication abilities, academic performance, and social status. Subjects were 36 children in fifth and sixth grades. The subjects completed a 30-item questionnaire on perceptions of themselves and their classmates along 3 factors: academic achievement, communication skills, and popularity. To measure actual communication ability, a discourse analysis was made of each child's spontaneous speech from tape-recorded discussions with peers. Correlations indicate that conversational ability was quite unrelated to either peers' or self ratings for either age group. In the discourse analysis, talking time and number of turns did not always discriminate between "good" and "poor" talkers. Results suggest that children tend to relate popularity, academic ability, and communicative skill, but these perceptions are not related to measured pragmatic skills. The questions used in the complete questionnaire and the Discourse Analysis (adapted from Damico) are appended. (HTH)

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# Relationships among Social Status, Pragmatic Skills and Academic Achievement

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What makes a child popular with peers? Student researchers at San Francisco State University who were studying children's communication hypothesized that there must be a positive relationship between a child's popularity and the child's communicative competence. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that a child's social status with peers would be associated with perceived communication abilities and academic achievement, with more popular children perceived by their peers as more skilled in conversation and in academic performance.

Some previous research would support these hypotheses. Hazen and Black (1989) studied the individual differences in the discourse skills of preschoolers and related these to the children's social status with peers. They found that liked children did display better communication skills than disliked children; in particular, the more popular children were better able to initiate and maintain coherent discourse by clearly directing communications to specific other children and by responding appropriately to the discourse initiations of others.

Peer acceptance of elementary school aged children has been associated with academic achievement. Austin and Draper (1984) used questionnaires to measured acceptance/rejection of peers and social impact, either positive or negative. They found that children who were high academic achievers were indeed more accepted by peers than low achievers. However, social impact in the classroom was greater for low achievers. The authors believed that low achievers were more prone to have negative interactions with peers, making them more visible and causing them to have a higher social impact than high achievers. Although Austin and Draper did not study communication skills directly, the negative interactions they described are suggestive of poor communication skills in the low achievers. However we do not know if the negative interactions were the result of failures in the ability to initiate and maintain communicative discourse, or if the unpopular children were simply bossy and unpleasant to be with.

Markell and Asher (1984) indicated that unpopularity is not merely an issue of personality dominance. In a study of dyads of popular and unpopular third and fourth graders, they explored whether unpopular children exhibit a

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bossy interpersonal style in a structured problem solving situation. Bossy was defined as "inappropriate and relatively aversive," including lack of responsiveness to other's requests, negative voice tone, disagreeableness, interrupting, and insistence on or repetition of one's own position. While previous studies of unpopular children in free play had found that unpopular children exhibited more negative behaviors than popular children, Markell and Asher found the reverse: unpopular children were generally more agreeable than bossy. Because Markell and Asher included both communicative behaviors and other types of behaviors in their definition of bossy, we cannot rule out poor communication skills as a factor in children's social acceptance by peers. An investigation of communication competence and the perceptions of communication abilities, academic performance and social status is warranted.

## Method

Subjects: A total of 36 children received parent permission to participate in the study. The primary subject group was comprised of an entire class (minus two) of fifth and sixth graders attending a suburban elementary school in the San Francisco Bay area. These 27 children included 14 girls and 13 boys, 23 White, 3 Latino, and 1 Asian. These children attended a "cooperative learning" school where discussion among the children was valued by the teachers. A second group of 9 second grade students also participated. In addition to age, these children differed from the primary group in their ethnic diversity (2 White, 1 Latino, 2 African American, and 4 Asian) and in the school they attended, a traditional urban elementary school.

Procedures: A thirty item (ten 3-part set) questionnaire was developed to investigate the children's perceptions of themselves and their classmates along three factors: academic achievement, communication skills, and popularity. For example, to explore communication ability one question set was: a) Choose two kids who talk the most in class discussions; b) Choose two kids who are the quietest in class discussions; and c) How often do you talk in class discussions? (on a scale from 1 to 5). Questions exploring each factor were randomly mixed, and two forms of the questionnaire were used to further randomized the item order. The questions used in the complete questionnaire are provided in Appendix A.

The questionnaires were administered in individual interviews of about ten minutes, as follows. A randomized array of photographs of the participating children in the class was placed in front of the target child. The children would point to pictures of children they chose for each question. For the children's self scores, they would place their own photo on a line marked with five points and labeled at the endpoints with 1 or 5 balloons. The arrangement of photos was changed often between subjects, to ensure that placement in the array did not influence the results. Following the interviews, each child's scores were tallied for perceived popularity,

perceived academic ability, perceived communication skills, and self rating on these three factors.

To measure actual communication ability, a discourse analysis was made of each child's spontaneous speech from tape recorded discussions with peers. Discourse samples were collected by placing the children in groups of three or four to discuss a current issue in the school for ten minutes. The 5th-6th grade class was very concerned about new lunch rules that had recently been imposed on them by school staff, and they were eager for an opportunity to discuss the situation. The 2nd grade group was invited to discuss their science fair projects or any other subject of interest. Groups were constructed so that each had a high talker, a low talker, and one of two mid talkers, based upon the questionnaire data. It was suggested that each child in the group state his/her name and give a brief statement of opinion before opening a group discussion. From these opening statements the researchers had a reference for identifying individual voices on the tape. Researchers were not present during the discussions, but roamed the periphery of the area, and were available to stimulate stalled discussions with questions or suggestions. The children were aware that the researchers wanted them to engage in conversation for a full ten minutes, and they cooperated.

Following the discussions, transcripts were made from the tape recordings. A discourse analysis system was adapted from Damico (1985) to measure the quantity, quality, relevance, and manner of each child's contributions. This system uses a 5 point scale to evaluate 12 specific characteristics: Number of speaking turns; Talking time (measured in minutes/seconds); Providing new information; using specific and graphic vocabulary (vs. nonspecific/vague words); Providing evidence to support ideas; Maintaining topic; Making topic switches appropriately; Giving information in a clear and orderly manner; Helping to regulate discourse in the group; Number of linguistic repairs (vs. breakdowns/interruptions); and Using clear referents. To ensure that the student researchers were using similar standards of evaluation, they practiced using the analysis system to evaluate the discourse of one group and checked the reliability of their ratings for the children in that group. Then they divided the task of analyzing the discourse of individual children. For most items in the analyses actual counts were made of occurrences, and then children were assigned scores from 1 to 5, based upon how their scores compared to the mean, median and spread of scores of other children in the class. A total communication score was computed for each child. The form used for analysis is provided in Appendix B.

## Results and Discussion

Simple correlations were computed for children's scores of perceived popularity, academic ability, and communicative skills, self ratings of popularity, academic ability and communication skills, and actual communicative competence as measured by discourse analysis. As shown in

Table 1. Correlations among perceived popularity, academic ability and communicative skills, self ratings of popularity, academic ability and communication skills and discourse scores for 5-6th graders and 2nd graders.

| | Perc. Pop. | | Perc. Acad. | | Perc. Com. | | Self Pop. | | Self Acad. | | Self Com. | | Discourse | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grade | 5-6 | 2 | 5-6 | 2 | 5-6 | 2 | 5-6 | 2 | 5-6 | 2 | 5-6 | 2 | 5-6 | 2 |
| Perc. Pop. | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Perc. Acad. | .83 | .79 | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Perc. Com. | .70 | .71 | .87 | .55 | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| Self Pop. | .59 | -.59 | .71 | -.83 | .64 | -.23 | 1 | 1 | | | | | | |
| Self Acad. | .36 | -.35 | .61 | -.30 | .70 | .30 | .56 | .38 | 1 | 1 | | | | |
| Self Com. | .37 | .25 | .50 | -.01 | .60 | .53 | .70 | .30 | .56 | .38 | 1 | 1 | | |
| Discourse | .14 | -.36 | .27 | -.28 | .16 | -.40 | .04 | .22 | .08 | .35 | .18 | .17 | 1 | 1 |

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Table 1, perceived popularity, academic ability and communicative skills were highly related, indicating that popular children are also believed to be smart and good talkers. This finding, which held up for both the older and younger subject groups, supports the finding of Austin and Draper (1984) that social status and academic skills are related.

Self ratings of popularity, academic ability and communication skills were moderately correlated for the older group, but the small group of second graders only produced correlations for self ratings of popularity and academic ability. Were the self ratings realistic, in terms of peers perceptions? For the older children, they tended to be so; peer's ratings of popularity, academic ability, and communicative skills were moderately correlated with self ratings. However the second graders were more modest; a negative correlation occurred between self ratings of popularity and peers' ratings of popularity and academic ability.

The primary question of the research was: Does actual conversational competence affect perceptions of popularity, academic ability or communication skill? The correlations indicate that conversational ability was quite unrelated to either peers' or self ratings for either age group. This finding conflicts with that of Hazen and Black (1989) that well liked children are able to initiate and maintain coherent discourse. About the second graders, the student researcher noted that unpopular children were not aggressive communicators and appeared to be good facilitators, while the popular children interrupted frequently and talked mostly about themselves. The communicative behavior of these children supports Markell and Asher's (1984) "dominance theory" that predicts greater agreeableness by children who are lower in a dominance hierarchy. Student researchers who studied the older group did take note of individuals who appeared to use communication

strategies that alienated their peers. One child was a frequent interrupter and monopolized the conversation so much that her talking time was 45%, compared to 25%, 13%, and 8% for the others in the group. Additionally, she appeared to listen poorly to others, and tended to carry on with her own previous utterance, rather than responding to what another group member had said. It may be that while popular children are easily forgiven for some amount of bossy communication, this child either had crossed the line of tolerance from her classmates, or else she had other personality traits that made her unpopular.

The analysis of discourse for quality was not easy. Although we had begun with a scale developed to identify persons with conversational deficits, certain traits appeared to better identifiers than others. Talking time and number of turns did not always discriminate between good and poor talkers; for example, one slow and redundant talker did take more turns than average and spoke for the longest actual time in the group. However, giving new information, use of graphic vocabulary, and providing evidence and reason were particularly useful in identifying strong communicators.

In summary, from our limited data, it appears that children tend to relate popularity, academic ability and communicative skill; however these perceptions are not related to measured pragmatic skills.

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Appendix A

Name_____ Grade_____ Date_____

Questions measuring perceived communication ability:

1a. Choose two kids who talk the most in class discussions.
b. Choose two kids who are quietest.
c. How often do you talk in class discussions (on a scale of 1 to 5)?
2a. Choose two kids who explain things the best.
b. Choose two kids who have trouble explaining things.
c. How well do you explain things (on a scale of 1 to 5)?
3a. If your class was going to be interviewed on T.V., pick two kids who would have the most boring things to say.
b. If your class was going to be interviewed on T.V., pick two kids who would have the most interesting things to say.
c. If your class was going to be interviewed on T.V., would you have interesting things to say (on a scale of 1 to 5)?

Questions measuring perceived academic ability:

4a. Choose two kids who will probably go to college.
b. Choose two kids who will probably not go to college.
c. What are the chances that you will go to college (on a scale of 1 to 5)?
5a. Pick two kids who could probably not win a prize for your class if you sent them to be on a quiz show, like Jeopardy, where they answer questions about school subjects.
b. Pick two kids who could probably win a prize for your class if you sent them to be on a quiz show, like Jeopardy, where they answer questions about school subjects.
c. If you were going to be on a quiz show like Jeopardy, where they answer questions about school subjects, how likely would you be to win a prize (on a scale of 1 to 5)?
6a. Choose two kids who know all the answers in school.
b. Choose two kids who usually don't know the answers in school.
c. Do you usually know the answers in school (on a scale of 1 to 5)?

Questions measuring popularity:

7a. Choose two kids you would not invite to your party.
b. Choose two kids you would invite to your party.
c. Do you usually get invited to other children's parties (on a scale of 1 to 5)?
8a. Choose two kids who have lots of friends.
b. Choose two kids who don't have many friends.
c. Do you have many friends (on a scale of 1 to 5)?
9a. Choose two kids who you would vote for in a school election.
b. Choose two kids who you would not vote for in a school election.
c. Would other kids vote for you in a school election (on a scale of 1 to 5)?
10a. Choose two kids that the teacher likes the least.
b. Choose two kids that the teacher likes the most.
c. How much does the teacher like you (on a scale of 1 to 5)?

## Discourse Analysis
## (adapted from Damico)

Name: _____ Grade: _____ Score: _____

| | High | | | | Low |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Quantity** | | | | | |
| 1. Number of talking turns: ____ | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 2. Speaking time in minutes ____ | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 3. New information given ____ Repeats known information ___ | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 4. Specific, graphic vs. nonspec. vocab | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| **Quality** | | | | | |
| 5. Provides evidence ___ | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6. Provides reason ___ | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| **Relevance** | | | | | |
| 7. Maintains topic on new turn ___ | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 8. Topic switch appropriate ___ | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| **Manner** | | | | | |
| 9. Gives information clearly & orderly | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 10. Helps to regulate flow of discourse | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 11. # repairs ____ breakdowns/interrruptions ____ | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 12. Uses clear referents | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |